13.

Maimonides

LETTER ON ASTROLOGY

Translated by Ralph Lerner

This letter (also known as the letter to Marseilles) by and large explains the circumstances attending its composition. A long and detailed series of questions relating to astrology has been sent to Maimonides by a group of Provencal rabbis. Maimonides is, as it were, compelled to answer even though he has already discussed the problems posed by astrology in the *Mishneh Torah* (*Code*) and in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. The rabbis have to be informed of the difference between the pseudo-science of astrology and the genuine science of the stars. This leads to an account of the controversy between the philosophers and the Jews concerning the origin of the universe and, further, to the controversy between philosophers, astrologers, and Jews with respect to the workings of providence. Maimonides' discussion of the fall of the Jewish commonwealth (at the end of the second paragraph) attributes the political disaster of defeat and consequent world-wide dispersion of the people to the ancient Jews' preoccupation with astrology. It is noteworthy that astrology is here regarded less as a transgression of the Second Commandment than as a witless diversion from the activities that help to preserve political communities.

The Hebrew text of this letter, together with variant readings, has been edited by Alexander Marx in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, III (1926), 349–58. Italic numbers in brackets refer to this edition. The letter on astrology has not previously been translated into English. Marx's paragraphing has not been followed.

Who is she that looketh forth as the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners? [Song of Songs 6:10] The inquiry of *our companions and familiar friends* [cf. Ps. 55:14], the skillful

sages *who know law and decree* [cf. Esth. 1:13], who dwell at Montpellier, has arrived. May the Name shield them and increase their wisdom and enlarge their learning and *command the blessing upon them in their storehouses and in all that they put their hands unto* [cf. Deut. 28:8]. Such is the wish of their brother and friend, who prays on their behalf and rejoices in their tranquillity, Moses, son of Rabbi Maimon (may the memory of the righteous be a blessing), the Spaniard. This inquiry testifies to the purity of their soul and the excellence of their understanding and shows that they pursue science and search into the chambers of understanding and hasten to ascend the steps of knowledge in order *to find out desired words and that which was written uprightly* [cf. Eccles. 12:10], and to understand the *word* and the *interpretation* [cf. Eccles. 8:1]. May the hand of the Lord be their help and lay open for them everything that is hidden and *make level every rugged place* [cf. Isa. 40:4]. Amen. I perceive in this inquiry that although its boughs are many, they are all branches of a single tree, which is their common root: namely, all the statements of *the astrologers, the stargazers* [cf. Isa. 47:13]. It is evident that the compilation we have made of the statutes of the Torah, which we entitled *Mishneh Torah,* has not reached you. If it had, you would have known directly my opinion regarding all those things of which you have inquired; for we have made this entire matter clear in [the section of that work called] "Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Nations." It seems to me that it will come to you before this reply, since it is already widespread on the island of Sicily, as well as in the West and in the East and in the South. In any case, I myself need to make this clear to you. [*350*]

Know, my masters, that it is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is a clear proof deriving from man's reasoning—such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses—such as when he knows with certainty that this is red and this is black and the like through the sight of his eye; or as when he tastes that this is bitter and this is sweet; or as when he feels that this is hot and this is cold; or as when he hears that this sound is clear[1] and this sound is indistinct; or as when he smells that this is a pleasing smell and this is a displeasing smell and the like. The third is a thing that a man receives from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: "This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason." Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said: *The simple believeth everything* [Prov. 14:15]. Thus you ought to know that fools have composed thousands of books of nothingness and emptiness. Any

number of men, great in years but not in wisdom, wasted all their days in studying these books and imagined that these follies are science. They came to think of themselves as wise men because they knew that science. The thing about which most of the world errs, or all of it—save for a few individuals, *the remnant whom the Lord shall call* [cf. Joel 3:5]—is that thing of which I am apprising you. The great sickness and the *grievous evil* [cf. Eccles. 5:12, 15] consist in this: that all the things that man finds written in books, he presumes to think of as true—and all the more so if the books are old. And since many individuals have busied themselves with those books and have engaged in discussions concerning them, the rash fellow's mind at once leaps to the conclusion that these are words of wisdom, and he says to himself: *Has the pen of the scribes wrought in vain* [cf. Jer. 8:8], and have they vainly engaged in these things? This is why our kingdom was lost and our Temple was destroyed and we were brought to this: for our fathers sinned and are no more because they found many books dealing with these themes of the star-gazers, these things being the root of idolatry, as we have made clear in "Laws Concerning Idolatry." They erred and were drawn after them, imagining them to be glorious science and to be of great utility. They did not busy themselves with the art of war or with the conquest of lands, but imagined that those studies would help them. Therefore the prophets called them *fools* and *dolts* [cf. Jer. 4:22]. And truly fools they were, *for they walked after confused things that do not profit* [cf. I Sam. 12:21, and Jer. 2:8]. [*351*]

Know, my masters, that I myself have investigated much into these matters; the first thing I studied is that science which is called judicial astrology—that is, [the science] by which man may know what will come to pass in the world or in this or that city or kingdom and what will happen to a particular individual all the days of his life. I also have read in all matters concerning all of idolatry, so that it seems to me there does not remain in the world a composition on this subject, having been translated into Arabic from other languages, but that I have read it and have understood its subject matter and have plumbed the depth of its thought. From those books it became clear to me what the reason is for all those commandments that everyone comes to think of as having no reason at all other than the decree of Scripture. I already have a great composition on this subject in the Arabic language [namely, the *Guide of the Perplexed*] with lucid proofs for every single commandment, but this is not required of us now. I now return to the subject of your inquiry.

Know, my masters, that every one of those things concerning judicial astrology that [its adherents] maintain—namely, that something will happen one way and not another, and that the constellation under which one is born will draw him on so that he will be of such and such a kind and so that something will happen to him one way and not another—all those

assertions are far from being scientific; they are stupidity. There are lucid, faultless proofs refuting all the roots of those assertions. Never did one of those genuinely wise men of the nations busy himself with this matter or write on it; no [nation] wrote such compositions or committed the error of calling it a science, other than the Chasdeans, Chaldeans, Canaanites, and Egyptians, for that was their religion in those days. But the wise men of Greece—and they are the philosophers who wrote on science and busied themselves with all the species of science (*madda'*)—mock and scorn and ridicule these four nations that I have mentioned to you, and they rally proofs to refute their entire position—*root and branch* [cf. Mal. 3:19]. The wise men of Persia also recognized and understood that all that science which the Chasdeans, Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Canaanites produced is a falsehood and a lie. Do not imagine that those refutations are mere assertions and that we therefore should not put our trust in them; rather there are lucid and correct, faultless proofs to refute that entire position, and the only one who would cling to it would be *a simple one who believes everything* [cf. Prov. 14:15] or one who wishes to deceive others.

And know, my masters, that the science of the stars that is genuine science is knowledge of the form of the spheres, their number, their measure, the course they follow, each one's period of revolution, their declination to the North [*352*] or to the South, their revolving to the East or to the West, and the orbit of every star and what its course is. On all this and the like, the wise men of Greece, Persia, and India wrote compositions. This is an exceedingly glorious science. By means of it the onset of the eclipses of luminaries may be known and when they will be eclipsed at any given place; by means of it there may be known the cause (*'ilah*) for the moon's (*yareah*) appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full, and then gradually waning; by means of it there may be known when the moon (*lebanah*) will or will not be seen; and the reason why one day will be long and another day short; and the reason why two stars will rise as one, but not set together; and the reason why a given day at a given place is thirteen hours long and in another place fifteen or sixteen or twenty hours long, yet being a single day. (In one place the day and the night will be of equal duration; in another place the day will be like a month or two months or three—so that a place may be found where the entire year is a single day, six months daytime and six months nighttime.) How many amazing conditions are made intelligible by this science, all of which is undoubtedly true. It is this calculation of astronomical cycles of which the [talmudic] sages said that it is wisdom and understanding in the sight of the [Gentile] peoples.[2] But as for these assertions of the stupid astrologers, they are nothing. I am now making clear to you the main points of those matters that are the mystery of the world.[3]

Know, that all the wise men of the Gentile nations—and they are the great philosophers, men of intellect and science (*madda'*)—were all in accord that the world has a Governor; He makes the sphere revolve, the sphere not revolving of itself. They have many books advancing a lucid proof for this; on this point there is no controversy among men of science (*madda'*). There is, however, a great controversy among them regarding this entire world, namely, the sphere and what is beneath it. (1) Most of them say that it is not subject to generation and corruption, but that as it is now, it was and it will be for ever and ever. Just as the Holy One (blessed be He), who was always the same as He is now, is making it revolve, so was He always making it revolve, and it was always being revolved; the two of them were always together, never was one without the other. (2) Among them there are those who maintain[4] that this sphere has come into being and that the deity has created it, but that there is a single thing that exists together with the Creator, *like the clay in the potter's hand* [cf. Jer. 18:6]. From that thing which exists together with Him, He makes whatever He pleases. Sometimes He will use some of that clay, as it were, to make heaven and some of it to make earth; and sometimes, if He pleases, He takes some of that out of which He has made heaven and makes something else out of it. But to bring forth something out of nothing is impossible. [*353*] (3) Among the philosophers there are those who maintain[5]—just as the prophets maintained—that the Holy One (blessed be He) created all created things out of nothing and that there is no other thing with the Creator aside from the creation that He has brought forth. Now the great controversy is over this point, and this is the very point that Abraham our Father discerned. A thousand books have already been written on this, with proofs that each and every one of them rallies to support its position. It is the root of the Torah that the deity alone is primordial and that He has created the whole out of nothing; whoever does not acknowledge this is guilty of radical unbelief and is guilty of heresy. I myself have already written a great composition in Arabic [namely, the *Guide of the Perplexed*] on these matters. I have explained the lucid proofs of the existence of the Creator and that He is one and that He is not a body or corporeal in any respect. I have shattered all those proofs that the philosophers advance as proving that the world was not created. In addition I have resolved all the great difficulties that they have raised against us on account of our maintaining that the deity has created everything that exists out of nothing. ——All these, then, are the three sects into which the wise men of the world fall, from the earliest antiquity down to now. (1) Those who maintain that the sphere is not a created thing, but that it eternally has been and will be just as it is. (2) Those who maintain that the deity has created it out of that matter which always exists by Him. (3) Those who maintain —just as all the prophets did—that there is no other thing that is with the

deity, just He Himself; and that when He wished, He brought forth this world out of nothing, in conformity with His will. All of these three sects are in accord on the following point. Everything that comes into being in this lower world—namely, every *living soul* [cf. Gen. 1:30] and every tree and every species of grass and every one of the species of minerals—the whole has the deity as its maker, through a power coming from the spheres and the stars. And they are in accord that the power of the Creator flows first upon the spheres and the stars; from the spheres and the stars it flows and spreads through this [lower] world—everything that is, thereby coming into being. Just as we maintain that the Holy One (blessed be He) performs signs and wonders through the angels, so do these philosophers maintain that all these occurrences in the nature of the world come through the spheres and the stars. They maintain that the spheres and the stars possess souls and knowledge. All these things are true. I myself have already made it clear, with proofs, that all these things involve no damage to religion. And not only this, but what is more I have understood from the sayings of the sages in all of the Midrashoth that they maintain as the philosophers maintained. There is no controversy whatever between the sages of Israel and the philosophers on these matters, as I have made clear in those chapters [in the *Guide of the Perplexed*]. [*354*] All three of these sects of the philosophers, which maintain that everything is made by means of the spheres and the stars, also maintain that whatever happens to each and every human being is due to chance; it is not due to any cause (*'ilah*) coming from above, and neither the constellation under which one is born nor nature will avail against it. There is no difference for them between this individual who was torn to pieces by a lion that happened upon him, or this mouse that was torn to pieces by a cat, or this fly that was torn to pieces by a spider. Neither is there a difference between a roof's falling upon and killing someone, or a rock's breaking loose from a mountain and falling upon a tree or upon another rock and breaking it. All this, they maintain, is simply fortuitous. It is said as well of those human beings who are warring with one another over a great kingdom, that they are like a pack of dogs warring over a carcass. This is not due to any cause (*sibbah*) coming from the stars. Further, this one's being poor and that one rich, this one's having children and that one's being childless—all the philosophers maintain that this is due to chance. The summary of the matter is that they maintain that what happens to each and every thing—be it man or beast or trees and minerals—is all due to chance. But the being of all the species[6] and the things comprehended in the entire world—in which there is not the activity of a living[7] soul—all of this stems from the power of the spheres whose root, in turn, comes from the Holy One (blessed be He). The controversy lies in this, that the true religionists, and that is the religion of Moses our Master, maintain that what happens to indi-

viduals is not due to chance, but rather to judgment—as the Torah says: *For all His ways are judgment* [Deut. 32:4]. The prophet explained: *Whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings* [Jer. 32:19]. It is regarding this that the Torah warned and bore witness and told Israel: *But if ye will not hearken unto Me* [Lev. 26:14], I shall bring hardship upon you. If you maintain that that hardship is not an affliction brought on by your sins, but rather due to chance and one of those things that happen by chance, why then I Myself shall heap more of that chance upon you—as it is written: *And if ye walk with Me [in the way of] chance, . . . then I will walk with you in the fury of chance* [Lev. 26:21, 28]. This is a root of the religion of Moses our Master, that everything happening to human beings is a [just] decree and judgment. Hence [the talmudic] sages maintained: "There is no death without sin and no affliction without transgression."[8]

And know, my masters, that it is one of the roots of the religion of Moses our Master—and one that all the philosophers also acknowledge—that every action of human beings is left to them and that there is nothing to constrain or draw them. Rather, if he so pleases, a man will worship God and become wise and sit in the house of study. And if he so pleases, he will follow the counsel of the wicked and run with thieves and hide with adulterers. There is no influence or constellation under which one is born that will draw him in any manner toward any one of those ways. Hence it was commanded and told to him: "Do this and do not do that." We have made clear many of the things involved in these matters in most of our [*355*] Arabic compositions, in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and in the rest of the compositions. Thus we ought to know that what happens to human beings is not—as the philosophers maintain—like what happens to the beast. Three disagreements are to be found in these matters. Imagine this situation. Here is Reuben, a tanner, poor, and his children have died in his own lifetime. And here is Simon, a perfumer, rich, and his children stand before him. (1) The philosopher will maintain that this is due to chance. It is possible that Reuben could become a perfumer, grow rich, and have children; and it is possible that Simon could become impoverished, turn into a tanner, and witness his children's death. All this is simply fortuitous. There is no nature in the world and no power emanating from a star that caused this individual to be or not to be thus. This is the position of the philosophers. (2) The second position is that of those who believe in judicial astrology and whose sayings you have heard and whose follies are widespread among you. They maintain that it is impossible that a given thing should ever change. Never will Reuben be anything other than a tanner and poor and childless, for it was thus fixed by the power of the sphere at the time of his birth. Similarly, it is impossible for Simon to be anything other than a perfumer and rich and

with surviving children, just as it was fixed by the power of the sphere at the time of his birth.——These two ways or these two positions are regarded as falsehoods by us. The position of the astrologers is given the lie by reason, for correct reasoning has already refuted, by means of lucid proofs, all those follies that they have maintained. It also is regarded as a falsehood by us because of the religious tradition, for if the matter stood thus, of what utility would the Torah and the commandment and the Talmud be to a particular individual? For in that event, every single individual would lack the power to do anything he set his mind to, since something else draws him on—against his will—to be this and not to be that; of what use then is the command or the Talmud? The roots of the religion of Moses our Master, we find, refute the position of these stupid ones—in addition to reason's doing so with all those proofs that the philosophers maintain to refute the position of the Chasdeans and the Chaldeans and their associates. The position of the philosophers who maintain that these things are due to chance is also regarded as a falsehood by us because of the religious tradition. (3) The true way upon which we rely and in which we walk is this: we say regarding this Reuben and Simon, that there is nothing that draws on the one to become a perfumer and rich, and the other to become a tanner and poor. It is possible that the situation will change and be reversed, as the philosopher maintains. But the philosopher [*356*] maintains that this is due to chance. We maintain that it is not due to chance, but rather that this situation depends on the will of *Him who spoke, and the world came into being* [cf. Ps. 33:9]; all of this is a [just] decree and judgment. We do not know the end of the Holy One's wisdom (blessed be He) so as to know by what [just] decree and judgment He required that this should be this way and that that should be the other way; *for His ways are not like our ways, neither are His thoughts like our thoughts* [cf. Isa. 55:8]. We rather are obliged to fix in our minds that if Simon sins, he will be punished with stripes and impoverished and his children will die and the like. And if Reuben repents and mends his ways and searches his deeds and walks in a straight path, he will grow rich and will succeed in all his undertakings and *see* [*his*] *seed and prolong* [*his*] *days* [cf. Isa. 53:10]. This is a root of the religion. If a man says, "But look, many have acted in this way and yet have not succeeded," why this is no proof. Either some iniquity of theirs caused this, or they are now afflicted in order to inherit something even better than this. The summary of the matter is that our mind cannot grasp how the decrees of the Holy One (blessed be He) work upon human beings in this world and in the world to come. What we have said about this from the beginning is that the entire position of the stargazers is regarded as a falsehood by all men of science (*madda'*). I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashoth whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's

birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies [that preceded its enactment]. Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. (You surely know how many of the verses of the holy Law are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the Translator[9] rendered it in a form that reason will abide.) A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back. Now *I have told you all my heart* [cf. Judg. 16:18] on this subject.

What has reached you in my name concerning the Messiah does not correspond to the facts; it was not in the East, in Isfahan. It was rather in Yaman that an individual arose (it is now some twenty-two years ago), and proclaimed that he was a messenger come to prepare the way for the King Messiah and told them that the Messiah was in the land of Yaman. Many people—Jews and Arabs—gathered about him, and they would move around in the hills. Our brethren in Yaman wrote me a long letter informing me of his way and judgment, of the innovations he had made for them in the prayers, [357] and of what he was saying. They said that they had already seen certain marvels of his. They questioned me about this. I gathered from all the circumstances that this poor individual is ignorant and god-fearing, indeed he possesses no wisdom at all, and that everything that they say he did or that came to sight through him is a falsehood and a lie. I trembled for the Jews who were there, and composed some three or four tablets for them on the subject of the Messiah and his signs and the signs of the time during which he shall appear; and I warned them to beware of this individual lest he be ruined and ruin the [Jewish] communities. The summary of the matter is that after a year he was seized, and all who had joined with him fled. The king of the Arabs who had seized him asked him: "What is this that you have done?" He replied: "What I have done, I have indeed done,[10] and according to God's word." Then he said: "What is your authenticating wonder?" He replied: "Chop off my head and I shall revive at once." He said to him: "You [can] have no greater sign than this. Certainly I—and the whole world—shall trust and know that my forefathers have bequeathed a falsehood." At once they killed the poor fellow. May his death be an atonement for him and for all Israel. The Jews in most places were punished by fines, and even now there are some ignoramuses there who maintain that presently he will come to life and rise. Such were the circumstances. If you heard that my letter has come to Fez, it is only

because those remarks of mine that I sent to Yaman were copied and arrived in Fez.

I have already told you that all the details of your inquiries on this subject are all branches of a single tree. I myself command you, out of my knowledge: *Hew down the tree and cut off its branches*, and so on [Dan. 4:11]. Plant in its stead *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* [cf. Gen. 2:9], and *eat of its goodness and its fruit* [cf. Jer. 2:7], and put forth your hands and take also from the tree of life. The Holy One (blessed be He) will absolve us and will absolve you for plucking off its fruit and for eating our fill of its goodness until we live forever. Amen. Written in great haste on 11 Tishri 1507 (of the Seleucid era) [= A.D. 1194] in the land of Egypt. May salvation be nigh.——Do not censure me, my masters, for the brevity of these remarks, for the writing makes it clear that I wrote it to fill a present need. For I was very busy with many Gentile affairs. The deity knows that if Rabbi Pinhas had not sent a messenger who *urged me till I was ashamed* [cf. II Kings 2:17] and did not leave my presence until I had written it, I would not be replying now since [*358*] I have no leisure. On this account, judge in my favor. Farewell, my brothers, friends, and masters; may you increase and be exalted forever. Amen.

NOTES

1. Reading *ṣalul*, as two MSS have it. If one reads *ṣarud* with Marx, the phrase would be: "that this sound is harsh and this sound is indistinct."
2. Cf. *Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath*, 75a.
3. Cf. *Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah*, 13a.
4. Or: "there is one who maintains."
5. Or: "there is one who maintains."
6. Reading *ha-minim*, as four MSS have it, rather than *hamonim* (multitudes).
7. Correcting a misprint in the text (354:12) to read *ḥayah*.
8. *Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath*, 55a.
9. The reference is to the Targum Onqelos, an Aramaic translation of the Bible.
10. Or: "I have dealt truly . . ."